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AUTHOR Obiakor, Festus E.
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ABSTRACT

This critique of the "America 2000" educational reform initiative claims that its fundamental proposals highlight "old" ideas based on a "puritanic" perfect society with little attention to equity and the multidimensional needs of such groups as African-American at-risk students. The paper discusses the impact of the "America 2000" program on African American at-risk students, with particular focus on the program's excessive reliance on national testing, school choice for parents, and instructional accountability at all levels. Criticism of national testing centers on issues of reliability and validity; school choice is seen as not being workable for inner-city African American parents; and instructional accountability is felt to result in discrimination against African-American teacher education students and failure to account for individual differences. The paper also examines the traditionally Eurocentric nature of American education. Recommended in place of the "America 2000" approach is an attack on inequities through practical implementation of multiculturalism and multiethnicity in assessment, placement, and instructional policies. (Contains 24 references.) (DB)

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"America 2000" Reform Program: Implications for African-American At-Risk Students

Festus E. Obiakor, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Special Education
Henderson State University
Arkadelphia, AR 71999-00001
(501)246-5511, Ext. 3437

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Abstract

Recent reform programs have emphasized excellence and quality in education. As the most recent reform program, "America 2000" was instituted to change the "Nation at Risk" to the "Nation of Students." This program is visionary; however, all its fundamental ingredients highlight "old" ideas based on a "puritanic" perfect society. Little attention has been focused on equity in testing, placement and instructional policies. For African-America at-risk students whose problems are multidimensional, "America 2000" program will only create more problems. This paper discusses the impact of "America 2000" reform program on African-American at-risk students with particular focus on excessive reliance on national testing, school choice for parents, and instructional accountability at all levels.

"America 2000" Reform Program:
Implications for African-American At-Risk Students

Recent reports and studies on educational reforms have emphasized individual and collective growth. They have challenged American schools to respond to "quality" and "equity" in education (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987, Clark, 1988; Goodlad, 1979; Obiakor, 1991; Trent, 1992). For example, Goodlad (1979) identified the aims of American schools which included (a)mastery of basic skills, (b)career and vocational education, (c)intellectual development, (d)enculturation, (e)interpersonal relations, (f)autonomy, (g)citizenship, (h)creativity and aesthetic perception, (i)self-concept, (j)emotional and physical well-being, (k) morals and ethical character, and (l) self-realization. As can be seen, Goodlad did not advocate high intelligence quotient as the ultimate aim of American schools. This frustration was also expressed by Cuban (1990) as he decried the repetitive nature of reforms and how educational programs have fallen prey to them. Of late, these reforms have emphasized higher test scores and "quality" and less or "equity" and common sense approaches that work (Obiakor, 1991, 1992; Trent, 1992).

The U.S. Department of Education (1991), in its book, America 2000: An education strategy mapped out six national education goals "to jump start a new generation of American schools, transforming a 'Nation at Risk' into a 'Nation of Students'" (p.59). According to the U.S. Department of Education, by the beginning of the 21st century:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer disciplined environment conducive to learning. (p.3)

The U.S. Department of Education added:

> America 2000 is a national strategy, not a federal program. It honors local control, relies on local initiative, affirms states and localities as the senior partners in paying for education, and recognizes that real education reform happens community by community, school by school, and only when people come to understand what they must do for themselves and their children and set about to do it. (pp. 5-6)

Apparently, the major ingredients of the "America 2000" reform program include (a)excessive reliance on national testing, (b)school choice for parents, and (c)instructional accountability at all levels. Based on these ingredients, there seems to be anticipated concerns, issues and fears by special education professionals and other service providers (Obiakor, 1992; Trent, 1992; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine and Nathan, 1993). In this paper, the author discusses the impact of "America 2000" education reform program on African-American at-risk students

with particular focus on excessive reliance on national testing, school choice for parents, and instructional accountability at all levels.

Excessive Reliance on National Testing

Testing is an integral part of instruction. It is either diagnostic (before instruction), formative (during instruction) or summative (after instruction). With regard to testing, the U.S. Department of Education (1991) noted that "a new (voluntary) nationwide examination system will be based on the five core subjects and tied to the world class standards" (p.13). These tests are supposed to enhance good pedagogy and reform the system of education. As the U.S. Department of Education pointed out, "Colleges will be urged to use the American Achievement Tests in admissions and employers will be urged to pay attention to them in hiring" (p.13). With all its good intentions, the "America 2000" program is unrealistic. It relies excessively on national testing (Obiakor, 1992; Trent, 1992), and engages in gross generalizations e.g. the use of <u>all</u>,<u>every</u>, etc. Many contemporary scholars and educators have despised the excessive reliance on standardized testing because environmental factors (such as nutrition, self-concept, motivation, anxiety, examiner behavior, examiner race, test sophistication, and language) have been found to affect academic and test performance (Gould, 1981, Hillard, 1989, 1991; Obiakor & Alawiye, 1990; Ogbu, 1988, 1990; Samuda, 1975). Issues of reliability and validity have haunted standardized test results. Critics have argued that tests may

produce consistent results, but may not measure what they purport to measure.

How can excessive reliance on standardized tests increase quality performance of all students? For African-American at-risk students who already confront multidimensional problems, excessive reliance on national testing creates further problems. It is common knowledge that placement problems are results of inadequate referral, identification and assessment. The question is, Can the "America 2000" reform program address the issue of equity when its central focus is national testing?

School Choice for Parents

School choice has been one centerpiece of the "America 2000" reform program. The U.S. Department of Education (1991) emphasized:

> If standards, tests and report cards tell parents and voters how their schools are doing, choice gives them the leverage to act. Such choices should include all schools that serve the public and are accountable to public authority, regardless of who runs them. (p.14)

Trent (1991), and Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine and Nathan (1993) wrote extensively on school choice for parents and students. These authors identified concerns and issues that are pertinent to school choice (e.g. quality and equity). With PL 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975) and PL 101-476 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990), parental consent has been at the forefront from assessment to individualized instruction of students. Even with these legislations, African-American students are still tested with

instruments that do not measure what they purport to measure. It is not surprising that a disproportionate number of African-American students are placed in special education programs and classified "as economically disadvantaged, educationally disabled, or both" (Trent, 1991, p. 300). History has revealed that litigations (e.g. Brown versus Topeka, Kansas School Board of Education) and earlier legislations have not had the desired impact on African-American parents. Many inner-city schools are now ear-marked as "poor" while schools in the suburbs are labeled as "rich" schools. How prepared are these "rich" schools to respond to the dreaded issue of cultural diversity of African-American parents and children? To this effect, Kaplan (1991) reacted:

> As an educational strategy, America 2000 is a plan for middle class America, where pride in academic achievement still runs high most of the time and most people like their community's schools. That some of these schools are performing below expectation is lamentable, but jettisoning them in order to conform to a market-driven, private school-oriented vision of schooling in a responsible democratic society is palpable nonsense, and very dangerous. (p.36)

There is another related question. How can parents who do not even attend Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) meetings go through the hassles of placing their at-risk students in private schools? It is apparent that school choice is a good idea that is not a workable idea for African-American parents who live in the inner-city. Recently, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine and Nathan (1993) reported the impact of school choice on open enrollment. They noted that "public school choice is here"

(p.390); however, they acknowledged the lack of support in some quarters because poor schools may become "dumping grounds for at-risk students, minority students, and students of poverty" (p.391). Simply put, the freedom of choice is not so "free" for African-American parents who themselves confront multidimensional problems.

Instructional Accountability at all Levels

With the institution of PL 94-142, and PL 101-476, the fundamental concepts of special education were further illuminated. The public was reassured of (a)adequate identification, (b)nondiscrimitory assessment, (c) multidisciplinary approach to assessment and instruction, (d)placement in the least restrictive environment, (e)confidentiality of information, (f) parental consent, (g)procedural safeguards, and (h)individualized education programming. The general consensus was that inappropriate identification results in a discriminatory assessment and a restrictive placement of individual students. How can the "America 2000" reform program which relies heavily on tests address the needs of African-American youngsters who frequently fall between the cracks? The issue of instructional accountability will be discussed from two perspectives (a)teacher training of African-Americans, and (b)instructional response to individual differences in African-American students.

Teacher Training

In this day and age, the reality of multiculturalism is apparent. Mendenhall (1991) indicated that "the more everyone in a group knows and understands the same set of social values, the less interpersonal problems will result between group members" (p.D7). In a similar fashion, Ross (1991) suggested:

> The way that the demographics are rapidly changing, Whites are going to be in the minority within the next ten years. Thus, it would behoove those that are ignorant and not receptive to other cultures to strive to be open-minded and accepting of people and their differences, so that we can all live in harmony. (p.A4)

The changing demography mentioned by Ross will eventually affect the work force in schools and communities. Mendenhall did note that "in many parts of the United States it is a reality -- and it is predicted that by the year 2010 it will be reality for the entire American work place" (p.D7). The question is, How prepared are America's teacher education programs to respond to these challenges? Price (1991) argued that "the blame for balkanization rests more with those who have the power to include but won't and less with those on the outside who are barred entry" (p.8).

Most teacher education programs rely on scores made in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the American College Test (ACT), and the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) for admission. In addition, before graduation, most States require students to have passing scores in the National Teacher Examination (NTE) for a gainful employment. These requirements create tremendous problems for many African-American student-teachers. Many of these students get frustrated and drop out of teacher education

programs -- this leads to a tremendous lack of African-American teachers in special education programs which have more African-American students. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) (1987) reported that the number of African-Americans in teacher education is small when compared to the number of African-American group children in public schools. For example, African Americans represent about 16.2% of the children in public schools, but only about 6.2% of the teachers.

Instructional Response to Individual Differences

When African-American students are taught by teachers who do not understand their cultures, symbols or values, the whole concept of individualized educational programming fails. To respond to individual differences, textbooks and methods have to be revisited. Thomas and Alawiye (1990) decried the non-representation of achievements of African-American members in the literature. They asserted:

> Our examination of selected elementary textbooks, grades 1 to 6 disclosed that the historical background and cultural contributions of slaves in early America are ignored. In particular, the art, architecture, literature, and music contributed by West Africans during their enslavement in the American South are excluded. (p.20)

The implication of Thomas and Alawiye's statement is that many instructional programs fail to acknowledge (a)historical backgrounds of African-American students, (b)language and symbols that African-American students bring to class, (c)behavioral patterns of African-American students, (d)cultural beliefs of African-American students, and (e)events which have molded

African-American group members (Banks, 1991; Gay, 1981). The complex web of informal rules and processes tend to decrease academic opportunities, choices and achievements for African-American at-risk students. These students are sometime made to feel that they cannot compete and excel in different educational programs.

Based on the above discussion, it is reasonable to argue that, "quality" without "equity" creates more problems than it solves. The "America 2000" reform program has been weak in its inability to address the issue of equity in teacher training and pedagogy. Rather than being inclusive, it is an exclusive visionary "puritanic" program that has little regard for the changing demography in America's classroom in the 21st Century.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It appears that both regular education and special education have failed African-American at-risk students and their parents. "America 2000," like other educational reform programs, is an innovative idea based on a perfect society. It emphasizes quality and excellence in education with little regard for equity and common sense approaches that work. Instead of bombarding the nation with more educational reform programs, existing educational programs need to be solidified. There are existing legislations which have been promulgated to foster quality and equity in testing, placement and instruction of African-American students in educational programs. The American demography is changing; and exclusive educational programs will not succeed in

the 21st Century. Following are pertinent issues which have to be addressed:

1. A myriad of works have noted that standardized tests lack validity and reliability (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Thurlow, 1992), yet educational programs have continued to use these tests. Is it not ironic that "America 2000" program has gone a step further to advocate national testing?
2. American education has been found to be extremely Eurocentric (Obiakor, 1992; Trent, 1992). African-American students have continued to confront multidimensional problems which range from inadequate assessment tools to improper teaching techniques. One apparent reason is that teachers who teach these students are very unaware of their values, culture and history. "America 2000" program did not address the issue of equity in teacher preparation programs. It is no surprise that many negative assumptions about African-American at-risk students in classrooms exist today. These assumptions have led to labels and categorizations, which, in turn have led to self-fulfilling prophecies.
3. How can a monocultural educational system respect differences "within" and "between" students? Present legislations in regular and special

education programs indicate (a) respect for individual differences, and (b)the provision of education in the least restrictive environment. "American 2000" program appears to have little consideration for individual differences in African-American students who already confront a myriad of problems in school programs.

Perspective

Different reports and studies have challenged American schools to respond to quality and excellence in education. Like these reports, the "America 2000" reform program is aimed at transforming America from a "Nation at-Risk" into a "Nation of Students." This idea sounds good; however, it has fundamental flaws for African-American at-risk students. Apparently, these students confront multidimensional problems which range from inadequate assessment and placement to inadequate instruction. Also apparent is the fact that regular and special education programs have failed them. Rather than help African-American students to maximize their potential, educational reform programs which restrict their instructional environments have been advocated. The question is, Is America ready to respond to future challenges of the 21st Century? The rat race for educational reforms is <u>not</u> the answer. The answer lies within the realistic intent of educational programs to attack inequities through practical implementation of multiculturalism and multiethnicity in assessment, placement and instructional

policies. Challenges that face our public schools today reflect challenges that will face the "America 2000" reform program. These challenges will continue as long as our educational programs are not challenged to respond to the needs of all segments of our changing society.

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